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# Household consumption and environmental change: Rethinking the policy problem through narratives of food practice

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## Abstract

Central to debates concerned with societal transition towards low-carbon living is the imperative to encourage individual subjects to shift their behaviours to support less consumptive ways of life: eating less meat, consuming less energy and water, and wasting less of what we do consume. Exploring narratives derived from 30 interviews with householders living in and around a UK city, this article considers the dynamics surrounding consumption, unpacking the notion that consumers act as agents of choice. Drawing on accounts of daily routines, the article pays close attention to the complexity of social, cultural and material factors that shape narratives of daily life, where food emerges as a core organising principle. This suggests that food practice provides a nexus point around which change can be more effectively conceptualised for public policies aimed at inculcating more sustainable ways of life. That is, through an understanding of food practice, we can explore means of locking and unlocking wider practices deemed unsustainable.

## Keywords

Consumption, sustainability, food, practice, policy

## Introduction

Evidence presented by the United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (UN IPCC) Fifth Assessment Report (IPCC, 2013) points to the

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unequivocal warming of the climate system. As planetary boundaries are increasingly transgressed, thus threatening humanity's safe operating space (Rockström et al., 2009), the sustainable development agenda (Brundtland, 1987) gathers momentum in integrating environmental, economic and social concerns into a new development paradigm (Baker, 2006), especially as Sustainable Development Goals replace Millennium Development Goals (Leach, 2013).

Extensive works in environmental social science (Macnaghten, 1998; Pretty et al., 2007; Redclift and Woodgate, 2010) undertaken over the last three decades are testament to a mounting contribution, which leads Wainwright (2011) to suggest that sociology is 'warming' to the study of climate change. Indeed, Urry (2011) makes the case for turning the sociological imagination towards issues of global environmental change that have until now been largely debated by the behavioural and natural sciences (Yearley, 2009), where the focus tends to lie with the relationship between attitudes and actions of individual social actors (Anable et al., 2006; Lorenzoni and Pidgeon, 2006). This article unpacks this problem framing by turning to an alternative conceptualisation as offered by theories of practice (Warde, 2005). Having outlined the methodological approach, the article then presents 10 consumer narratives pertaining to daily routines, thus adding further insight as to the location of food practices as a nexus point around which further daily life practices coalesce. Around such a nexus point, it is argued that change towards more sustainable ways of accomplishing daily life may be better understood. Such an alternative problem representation (Bacchi, 2009) offers a novel approach for public policy seeking to inculcate changes in the face of numerous sustainability challenges presented by a changing climate.

### *The unsustainable consumer as a public policy problem*

Central to debates concerned with societal transition towards low-carbon living is the imperative to encourage individual subjects to shift their behaviours to support more sustainable ways of life. Changing the landscape of political participation is the citizen-consumer who translates moral virtues into marketplace activities. They are thought to represent a new mode of governance for the consumer age (Ryan, 2001; Trentmann, 2007) where interventions such as green labelling allow for engaged public participation (Boström, 2008). Should such ethical and political consumerism offer, as Soper (2007) argues, a means for realising an alternative vision of consumption as the 'good life', political consumerism comes to represent an *individualised form of collective action* (Micheletti, 2003).

Stemming a critique of this approach, Miller and Rose (1997) find in their case study of archives from the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations – for whom a key concern throughout the post Second World War was to understand what mobilises consumers towards a fulfilment of needs via certain consumer

products – that the struggle to ‘make-up’ and comprehend the consumer was no simple matter of understanding rational choices. Rather,

in order for a relation to be formed between the individual and the product, a complex and hybrid assemblage had to be inaugurated, in which forces and flows imagined to issue from within the psyche of persons of particular ages, genders or social sectors were linked up to possibilities and promises that might be discerned within particular commodities, as they were organised within a little set of everyday routines and habits of life. (Miller and Rose, 1997: 41)

In other words, the consumer represents a highly problematic entity, whose actions result from the dynamic interaction of agency and structure (Giddens, 1984; Bourdieu, 1990). From the data analysed, this article takes forward this conceptualisation by drawing upon sociological framings of everyday life practices (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2010; Shove et al., 2012) and the ‘ordinary consumption’ entailed (Gronow, 2001). Doing so critically explores a dominant framing in public policy, that poor choices made by individuals are at the root of the problem of unsustainability. Indeed, current policy interventions such as ‘nudge’, as championed by Sunstein and Thaler (2008), have taken the individual as the root of the problem to be solved. As Bacchi (2009) argues, how a problem is represented shapes the policy response, and over time, the very problem itself (Billings and Hermann, 1998).

Many authors, including Warde (2005) and Shove (2010), argue for a practice orientation in exploring consumption, which offers an alternative means of framing the problem of the unsustainable consumer. A practice is understood a routinised behaviour made up of several interconnecting elements: bodily actions, mental activity, emotional meaning, materials ‘things’ and background knowledge or ‘know-how’ (Reckwitz, 2002). A practice-theoretical lens offers a means of exploring the interaction between our attitudes and the world around us, understood as producing particular ways of acting, saying and doing. Thus, we refocus away from individual behaviours, attitudes and mental processes of rational calculation as the engine of social life. For example, domestic technologies themselves such as washing machines, tumble dryers and cooking devices have been understood to reconfigure and reproduce practices over time. For Hand et al. (2005) domestic technologies become implicated in ‘the choreography of things and people in time and space’ (p. 680). Here, the material, spatial and temporal organisation of the home affects what people come to *do* within their home, shaping what becomes normal over time – washing and drying clothes more often, purchasing and freezing larger amounts of food. In asking how it is that a group of office dwellers might be dislodged from the expectations of having an ambient and controlled indoor temperature at work, Hitchings (2011) suggests that it is not so simple as to frame such expectation as a matter of individual choice. Rather, ‘as a consequence of being recruited into particular patterns of comparatively habitual

behaviour' (Hitchings, 2011: 2839), these office dwellers interact with embodied sensibilities (the proclivity to appropriate work attire), habitual modes of thought (social context) and physical infrastructure (the ambient environment itself). Arguing for a fuller account of how these elements combine in producing everyday actions – embodied sensibilities, habits and infrastructure – it becomes nascent to think of individuals as addicted to thermal standards, but to think of a wider system that guides and shapes such ideas of comfort.

Within the home, Truninger (2011) explores changing competences in the kitchen, where cooks are recruited to the practice of cooking with 'Bimby' – a multi-functional 'Thermomix' food processor. Here, the interplay between images or 'embodied sensibilities', technologies and competences afford new possibilities for cooking in daily life. Similarly, Wheeler (2012) employs a practice-theoretical approach in exploring preference for Fairtrade goods via interviews facilitated with a collection of respondents' shopping receipts. Here, Wheeler (2012) argues that consuming Fairtrade is enacted as a bundle of 'doings and sayings' (p. 132). Just as Reckwitz (2002) points to the nature of individuals as the 'crossing points' of practices, the purchase of Fairtrade goods forms part of a wider comingling of routines, preferences and social norms that produce a moment of consumption as part of wider practice performances. With further regard to food, Evans (2011) suggests that household food waste is a product of particular social and material conditions that have become culturally, socially and materially embedded in day-to-day life. For example, conventions that surround feeding the family include adherence to rules around the constitution of a 'proper' meal (DeVault, 1991) and conventions as to how ingredients are safely stored. In preparing such a meal, food packaging norms may restrict our ability to select exactly the amount required, leading to overprovision.

Given that the experience-oriented narratives elicited in this study often turn without prompt to the topic of food, this article argues that food provides a nexus point around which policy interventions towards sustainability may be better understood. This is not to say that judgements are being made as to what sorts of consumption practices are better than others. Indeed, Born and Purcell (2006) and Edwards-Jones et al. (2008) each make a strong case that local food, for example is not necessarily more sustainable than their global counterpart. Nor is it possible to distinguish easily between the merits of alternative and more conventional mechanisms of food supply, as argued by Sonnino and Marsden (2006). Moreover, while food has received much empirical and theoretical attention with regard to food production and supply chains (Goodman, 2003), Eden et al. (2008) suggest that studies have tended to focus heavily on production and points of consumption, while largely neglecting consumers themselves. This article explores and embraces this notion of complexity and contradiction, and in so doing, continues to problematise the notion of consumer choice by drawing on accounts of daily routines and the connections between them. Here, food figures as a prominent organising principle in daily life, suggestive of a fertile ground for research that seeks to go beyond debate over the advantages of a particular logic of production

or supply over another, and instead looking at consumers as the carriers of practices. Exploring food as a nexus thus furthers understandings of how practices come to be locked and unlocked by virtue of their interaction with wider rhythms of daily life.

## Methods

Statistics compiled from the 2001 census are used to identify areas of different demographic composition: students, families, retired, unemployed or professional residents as well as differences in the housing itself; semi-detached, terraced, apartments. Leaflets were distributed through letterboxes, followed by door-knocking, recruiting 30 participants in total. While we would expect there to be class differences across households, and that these would affect the organisation of food practices, discussion of this is reserved for elsewhere, for this article makes no comparisons between households and their householders at this stage. Instead, the paper concentrates upon the broader themes that emerged from the data, and across all types of households and areas sampled. It is around each of these three themes that the empirical section of this article is organised in order to allow space to more fully explore the food practices themselves, regardless of social and cultural differentiation at this stage.

During interview, participants were asked to speak of daily routines, from which we gain an insight not only as to how participants speak of habitual practices, but also of the sets of relationships and structures around which daily life becomes organised, understood and reproduced. That is, we address the semantics of narrated 'experience', and not the syntax of 'storied' events (Andrews et al., 2008: 41). Moreover, by focusing upon routines centred in and around the home, this analysis makes a contribution to work that seeks to rescue understandings of household consumption from being reduced to either the mundane act of provisioning the home (Lunt and Livingstone, 1992) or at the other extreme, as a political act (Micheletti and Stolle, 2007). Instead, consumption is a 'moment' in almost every practice (Warde, 2005). The 'stuff' (Miller, 2010) that we accumulate is more than the realisation of what may widely be considered superficial consumerist frenzy, but as materials figured in the accomplishment of practices that make up social life. From the equipment necessitated by leisure pursuits such as Nordic walking (Shove and Pantzar, 2005), different cycling practices and ways of doing dinner parties (Mellor et al., 2010), consumption comes to be seen as less about the meaningless accumulation of goods by disaffected consumers and more as the embodiment of social life in material culture.

From this perspective, it is therefore imperative to understand how, for example, carbon emissions reductions are to be met not through the chastisement and penalisation of high consumption of goods and services, but to understand the practices that *demand* consumption. Supporting comprehensive work that seeks to re-frame policy responses to consumer behaviour (Spurling et al., 2013), we look at such complex dynamics between social meanings, competencies and

material culture through narratives that highlight both the fixity and interconnectedness of daily routines as well as accounts of changed practices hinged upon shifts in the life course. While Wheeler (2012) encouraged discussions of daily routines via the use of shopping receipts, this study interviewed people in their homes in order to facilitate dialogue concerning around household provisioning as then related to activities outside of the home. Doing so is an established means of discovering the contexts in which change occurs in daily life, as participants reflect on present as well as the past in speaking through biographical transitions (Southerton, 2006). In this way, the qualitative interview reconstructs practice through the participants' narrative, that is, as they make sense of their daily lives and routines through talk (Holstein and Gubrim, 2004; Mason, 2002). While such an approach may invite criticism on the grounds that narrative methods privilege the voice of the individual and neglects the materiality of the world around them, Riessman (2008) reminds us that narrative is as much about making sense of how the world around us shapes our practices and experiences as well as making sense of how we experience this world. Understanding the location of the individual experience within a practice is not the same as taking a methodologically individualistic ontological view. While care is taken here to suggest any generalisability of these findings, I stress that the narratives discussed provide an avenue for further exploration. Exploring in detail the accounts of 10 out of 30 participants allows for insights as to how they make sense of change in their lives, the potential for success in these endeavours and the internal as well as external the conflicts associated with them. Conversely, we then explore narratives that account for life-course changes and critical 'moments' (Hards, 2011), such as becoming a parent or moving home that ripple across a number of interlocking practices, highlighting the temporality and rhythm of food practice that render them both resistant and open to changes in practice. The decision to select narratives from 10 out of 30 participants is made on the basis that these participants express most succinctly a dynamic prevalent across the data, that food-related practices figure prominently in the organisation and patterning of daily life. There is simply too little space to explore fully the multitude of ways in which such dynamics find expression. However, the three themes below arise from analysis of all 30 interviews, which were coded in Nvivo as a means to organise the data. The following themes are the richest and the most prominent codes to emerge from the data.

## **Narratives of routine**

### *Fixity and fluidity*

Alan is a research assistant in his late twenties lodging in a terraced suburb of the city. He feels he is stuck in a 'bad routine'. Having spent years attempting to 'live better' Alan speaks of his struggle to live up to how he feels his life should be organised, finding it difficult to put his ideal lifestyle into practice. Indeed, Alan



highlights how change requires a number of elements to each fall serendipitously into place with one another:

Well because first of all it's a symptom of being disorganised and in a bad routine of, probably going to bed too late and getting up too late and if I just decided to... I mean I having said that I tend to go through periods of living really well and really disciplined with a good routine. There might be a few months where I basically wake up in the morning have a couple of apples for breakfast after that when I'm in work, use the gym at work and then feel really good and have a small lunch and usually rustle up a fairly healthy dinner but other times if for some reason I let it go a little bit and tumble into a bad routine again. At this point now in order to become a creature of routine I try to actually arbitrarily say right, this is gonna be my week. So in that respect it's a schedule that I hope will become routine.

Here, Alan even begins to suggest that he might learn to be a little less disorganised if only he had the impetus to decide to do so, before recounting periods in which he considers himself to have succeeded. In teasing out what it is that knocks Alan from these newly formed routines, he speaks of periods of illness, changing work patterns and moving house. Living with different people, for Alan, has inspired changes in ways of eating in the past, such as eating predominantly vegan food while living with vegan housemates. Once he moved on from this house-share, he also slid back into eating meat, fish and dairy. While he might have possessed the social impetus to eat vegan while living with vegan housemates, this embodied sensibility did not travel with him, nor did the knowledge of vegan cooking practices carried by his past housemates. Therefore, we might suggest that the decision to live more healthily is not sufficient enough a motivation to drive such a lifestyle change. As Mylan (2014) argues, based on her analysis of laundry and lighting, elements of a practice interconnect with other practice elements and do so in a manner that can be described as tightly or loosely coupled, with differing outcomes in the uptake of innovations in these fields. In this case, we can see that elements of Alan's vegan practice are only loosely coupled with interconnecting practices related to housing dynamics and infrastructure, work and emotional associations. From this, it is argued that exploring the number of elements holding together a routine, we can see both the potential steadfastness and fragility of practices as tied temporally to daily rhythms and life-course events, depending on the strength of the relationship between interconnecting practice elements.

Similarly for Francesca, a radiographer in her mid-twenties, living in a rented terraced home, daily life is arranged around work-shift patterns. Rotas for clothes washing and drying, vacuuming and cleaning the bathroom clearly mark responsibilities for chores shared with her housemates. Cooking remains an individual undertaking. Indeed, her set daily routine allows for the successful enactment of the many practices that support her way of life, such as cooking and freezing meals in



individual portions ready to be defrosted and re-heated upon her return from work. Without the freezer, Francesca suggests she would be at a loss as to how to negotiate the various pressures and demands upon her time. If this routine is disrupted, Francesca tends to opt for 'take-aways and stuff, when I just can't face cooking, or forgot to prepare in advance'. The social conventions of shared living, knowledge of food preparation and storage, coupled with the convenience offered by supporting technologies such as the slow-cooker and the freezer together produce a repeated pattern of activities that in time have developed into routines that might prove difficult to undo.

Similarly, Connie and William – a retired couple in their late eighties living in terraced house within a residential zone of the city – speak of changes and continuities across their lifetime. Connie and William speak of life lived together over the last 60 years in their house, which they claim has 'not changed much over the years'. Their house has not undergone structural alteration, and their furnishings have been acquired over time, necessitating very little in the way of replacement and refurbishment. Much like the other three elderly couples interviewed, their retirement period has cemented a set of routinised practices: exercise classes, lunch with friends in a local club, time with grandchildren, and walks around the park and going out for Sunday dinner. They eat 'full hot meals' at their social club, and tend only to prepare small or cold meals at home: 'sandwiches, soup, or a jacket potato'. Each activity has a set day and time allocation, and its repetition seems only to be at risk in the case of ill-health. Crucially, the only interruptions capable of dislodging and forming new routines, or the slippage into old ones noted across the sample, are those brought by wider shifts in the life course, generally shaped by life events such as marriage, divorce, the arrival of a child or moving home.

### *Moments for change*

As well documented in social scientific research, life-course events provide fertile ground for changes in practices (Marshall and Anderson, 2002; Plessz et al., 2014; Shirani and Henwood, 2011). For Samantha, having a child 'changed everything'. While working professionals, she and her partner were well practised in arriving home late in the evening, eating take-away food or 'something quick' like a ready-bought microwaveable meal or an omelette. They now eat home-cooked food 'from scratch'. Indeed, the time at home afforded by a period of maternity facilitated local shopping at several points throughout the week. Importantly, Samantha's ability to structure childcare around local food shopping is made possible by her location. Living on the outskirts of the town centre, she is situated near to a number of grocers, small supermarkets, butchers and delicatessen. Walking to local shops is built into wider daily routines of visiting the park, attending appointments and meeting friends. As noted by Halkier (2009), each cooking performance may play out differently as the practitioner enacts different styles of cooking in different contexts: the improvised, the planned, the healthy or

the manageable meal. Indeed, Samantha does not visit local shops everyday. While such performances may vary, the ways in which such performances rely upon interconnecting elements and wider interconnecting practices is, however, unflinching.

In contrast to Samantha, Lydia makes trips by car to an out-of-town supermarket to provision her home. These are trips made while her daughter is taking part in play clubs and at nursery school, afforded also by the flexibility of working as a self-employed physiotherapist. This contrasts to her routine prior to motherhood of provisioning the home through one large weekly shop at a supermarket, which she is now unable to complete, for her child, she claims, will 'act up' if too long a time is spent on one activity. To satisfy these needs, Lydia makes several short trips to the supermarket in conjunction with the completion of further daily tasks such as visiting parents living in a nearby village, tending to clients and caring for her child. It is clear that any shift in behaviour is hinged upon the coming together of several elements of other daily routines and practices. This dynamic is familiar to Jenny, another first-time mother living in the same area:

now that I'm at home more, I do a lot more cooking. When we were working we didn't need a fridge full, we would just nip across the road and get dinner, and now we have a big fridge full.

Indeed, being at home makes planning meals easier, and a bigger shop at a supermarket fills the fridge with ingredients for meals planned and prepared in advance to enable its eating to coincide with their young baby being asleep. However, 'before we'd have more things like stir-fry's and quick-to-cook things when I come in from work. Now I can turn it on and leave it on, but I can't be at the cooker, cooking all the time'. Just as Alan and Francesca have negotiated moments in which food preparation and consumption takes place in relation to their work day, Samantha and Lydia achieve similar tasks in different ways. Crucially, in each case, practices of food consumption are always but an element of wider set routines geared towards childcare, work as well as social and family commitments, highlighting the social flow of food-related practices, which arguably cannot be understood as contingent entirely upon individual agency and choice. We also see that different infrastructures are implicated in reproducing routines of food procurement, preparation and consumption. Cars play lesser or more prominent roles depending on location relative to the city as well as the presence and efficacy of public transport infrastructure. Changing cooking practices is therefore clearly linked to life-course events such as changing work patterns, cohabitation, and the arrival of a child. Cutting across such moments are altered driving patterns, the purchase of new domestic technologies such as a tumble dryer or a larger fridge/freezer. Concurrent with the findings of Butler et al. (2014) in their analysis of energy consumption and daily life, such shifts are not, however, presented as rational decisions to drive more or to consume more energy, but appear to be considered as the consequence of their daily life demands. Resources, skills and

standards are reconfigured, renegotiated and reconsidered as part of the recruitment to new practices and/or their defection from another. The practice 'block' (Reckwitz, 2002), therefore, is undone by the loss of connection between different elements of that routine. While Alan reflects on his routines as locked because he finds it difficult to achieve changes he would like to make to his daily routines, we see here that practices are also somewhat fluid. Under certain circumstances, they would be entirely unlocked and reconfigured.

For example, following separation from her partner, Mary moved from the inner city to the outer suburbs. While Mary purports to have always been interested in 'green living', she has found that previously entrenched practices were uprooted when, having split from her partner, she moved house. Mary attributes the different supporting infrastructure now surrounding her in accounting for her lapse in commitment to local food shopping, for example,

What else do I do? I've been doing it so long, I don't even think about it. I used to be far more extreme in terms of not wanting to go to supermarkets and stuff but here it's much more difficult. When I lived in town it would be easier, I could go to the market and stuff, but I try and think about producers rather than big supermarkets.

While Mary lived near the city centre, she was able to undertake a degree of local shopping as part of a wider routine involved in the travel to and from her place of work. Her daily routines would take her past a number of independently owned shops and grocers, meaning that a visit to the supermarket was but a rare event, performed monthly in order to stock the store cupboard. However, the routines that worked together in upholding the practice of home cooking have fallen away with following a separation from her partner. To inculcate a new set of routines, Mary is re-imagining not just what she cooks, but of the temporality of cooking and shopping alongside their interconnection with other routines such as exercise, meditation, travel to and from work. Indeed, the loss of the shared meal with a loved one has disrupted embodied sensibilities and meanings that worked together in holding fast the practices of home cooking and local shopping. Indeed, the adoption of new technology has facilitated this transition to a new routine:

When I lived with my partner I loved cooking but since I've lived on my own I got quite lazy but I've got a slow cooker and that's been fantastic as I'll often buy some nice meat and then just make a big curry or big stew or something and get that to last me three or four nights with something different on the side.

The slow-cooker allows for a compromise between Mary's lost fervour for cooking, her daily commute to the suburbs of the city and her social life that now includes new hobbies alongside her ambition to eat more healthily. While provisioning the home with the necessary ingredients to prepare a meal now requires a designated trip to a supermarket, the decision to do so is not taken lightly. Mary agonises over the contradictions evident in her desire to avoid

supermarkets on account of her opposition to oligopolistic market forces, underlined by reference to her following of activist texts and online blogs. Despite her rebuttal of supermarkets in principle, Mary is unable to put this sentiment into practice, for she is locked into routines and infrastructures that do not support this lifestyle.

Similarly, Rhys' move away from the city to a village on the outskirts of the city and its suburbs city has enabled the interlocking of new commuting, shopping and cooking practices. Crucially, Rhys' village is situated alongside a river path with a dedicated cycle lane. Commuting to work by bicycle, the additional exercise afforded enabled Rhys to cancel his now redundant gym membership, reducing the number of car journeys made for both work and leisure. While we are not able here to explore the carbon footprint of these shifting practices in order to make a clear judgement about the relative benefits of a changed routine – does Rhys now eat more meat to compensate for the energy spent commuting by bicycle? However, we are able to see that any account of changes to routine practices is contingent upon wider practices and shifts in the daily or life-course path, as conceptualised by Pred (1981). Thus, practices are not independent of one another. There is a temporality and rhythmic order to routines made up of interconnecting practices (Shove et al., 2012) that make up everyday life. Indeed, as the everyday 'establishes itself, creating hourly demand, systems of transport, in short, its repetitive organisation' (Lefebvre, 2004: 7) we are reminded that we are not so much the carriers of routines, habits and practices, as much as we are captured and carried along by them.

### *Carried by practice*

A recurrent theme throughout the data is represented by further discussion of decision-making processes with regard to meals prepared at home. Indeed, meals are not planned, but are guided by the contents of store cupboards that hold ingredients for a repertoire of dishes that are repeatedly made and adapted over time. Becca, who is in her mid-30s and cohabits with her boyfriend near the city centre, speaks of how meals are decided upon in her home. The decision to prepare 'spaghetti bolognese, she suggests, is guided by the contest between ingredients in stock and their potential to be put together into a reasonable and coherent dish. Having spaghetti, onions, tinned tomatoes, dried herbs and a third of a bottle of left-over red wine from a previous meal or occasion, here guides the ruling to 'pop in to the shop on the way home from work to get some mince, or maybe add some veg I have left in the fridge'. Had there been no spaghetti, a different meal altogether may have come to fruition via the meeting of available ingredients, and the know-how and cultural comfort afforded by her culinary repertoire. This is not to say that this is necessarily a rational choice made, but the coming together of practice elements that Shove et al. (2012) refer to as materials, infrastructure and meaning. They have the appropriate materials and competencies (e.g. spaghetti, tinned tomatoes and the know-how of how to prepare a dish that incorporates

them), the infrastructure that interlocks with other practices (a route of commuting to work that takes Becca past a small supermarket) and the meanings or, indeed, the culturally embedded notion that cooking spaghetti in this way is appropriate. They are not flouting social conventions or acting outside of the norm, but are building on traditions and embodied sensibilities associated with a comforting, nutritious, affordable week-day meal.

With regard to lunchtime food provisioning, Gemma prepares a packed lunch for her family each morning. Recruiting her 3-year-old son as a helper, sandwich rolls are laid out and fillings rarely deviate from the regular appearance of ham and cheese, cheese and pickle, or tuna and onion, with a piece of fruit and a small chocolate-based treat. Not solely a food preparation activity, Gemma claims this is part of educating her son about not eating 'rubbish' bought in canteens or from vending machines. Gemma suggests that by becoming involved in food preparation, she hopes this practice will become normal for him. Indeed, as we saw above with Becca's usual way of forming a typical evening meal, Gemma recognises the temporally layered nature of food practice, and the difficulty of uprooting habitual and culturally resonant practices later on in life. Like Alan, changing undesirable food practices is not easy, as it involves unlocking oneself from a suite of interconnected practices. One can imagine from such accounts that people are not so much carriers of these practices, but rather, that practices are governed via their interconnections.

Illustrating this dynamic further is Victoria, who is in her mid 60s and lives in one of the city's less affluent neighbourhoods. She speaks of a collection of meals that are prepared and repeated weekly in tandem with her responsibilities at work, caring for elderly family members and occasionally her visiting children. Having clear preferences for foods that have been part of her culinary repertoire since childhood, Victoria is fervently opposed to trying new foods or recipes. Delving further into her account, it becomes clear that such vehemence is not solely the result of a visceral dislike of particular foods, but is tied to further constituent elements upholding this particular way of eating. Speaking of the routines that puncture her day, Victoria presents herself and her husband as having developed a strict repertoire of dishes that are cooked on set evenings of the week, which she sometimes delivers to her brother living nearby. Her husband cooks 'sausage and mash on a Wednesday' and a 'full cooked dinner on a Sunday', which they describe as the 'major meals' of the week. In addition, Victoria makes 'macaroni cheese on pasta night, and something with fish every Friday'. Vegetables are missing from this repertoire, for even as a child, she refused to eat them, a trend repeated by her children. However, since her eldest son began living with his girlfriend, he has now had vegetables introduced to his diet, and has even attempted to inspire change in his mother's eating habits, albeit unsuccessfully:

I don't like it, I, you know, as a child my mother sat me down and said 'you're eating that or you're not having anything else' and I was still there at bed time, and I just sat there saying 'I'm not gonna eat it, no way', always hated, I mean, you know, I went on

a sort of diet at one time where I was trying to eat much more, my sons came and made me, a what was it, some sort of pesto with things you know, pesto pasta with erm a mixture to make it a sort of dip and they even brought carrots to eat it with because he was trying to convince me that it's a better way of eating you know I ate 'em but that was it, they were saying 'go on Mam you can do it', and it's funny him saying that 'cause it's only 'til he went and lived with girlfriend who did like veg, all his younger life he was murder to feed, he was as bad as me when I was a kid.

Victoria's aversion might not be so easily attributed simply to her dislike of vegetables or lack of knowledge as to their health benefits, but could result from the entrenchment of distaste over time, making it unreasonable to now consider incorporating them into her gamut of established recipes. While there is a daily and weekly order to meals shopped for, prepared and consumed, there is also a temporal sequence ordered at the level of the life course. Indeed, the change in her son's vegetable eating had only begun once he was co-habiting with a girlfriend who 'did like veg'. Vegetable thus became part of the cultural repertoire of what comprises a 'proper meal' (DeVault, 1991), suggesting that changes in food practice are facilitated by shared daily routines. That is, a life-course event, such cohabiting with a partner for the first time can facilitate recruitment to a new practice of eating vegetables through the interlocking of elements in new ways. However, just as Alan did not continue eating a vegan diet, Victoria's son might not carry with him this new practice should current arrangements change, as element of that practice might then connect differently.

## **Food as a nexus point for policy intervention**

Exploring the complexity of factors shaping everyday life, this article highlights the constraints faced by individuals in putting choices into practice. That is, despite their best will, individuals face difficulties in realising changes in their daily lives – healthy eating, shopping locally or preparing meals 'from scratch' all serve as examples of changes desired. From the narratives explored above, it seems that difficulties faced in overturning old practices need not be theorised as a lack of individual will, but the result of a combination of social, cultural and material factors. Such factors combine in ways that both deeply entrench undesirable practices, while at other times, the complementarities of other daily routines combine in supporting the inculcation of new practices. These examples may serve as reminders not only of a limited capacity for particular attitudes or beliefs to bring forth changes in the ways on which we go about our daily lives – a belief may indeed act as inspiration, but cannot 'do' – but of the inter-dependency of practices, routines and rhythms that interlock in making-up daily life. It is not as individuals that we enact change. Rather, it is the carriers of routines and practices that we become figured in transformations of social and technical orders as we know them. It is a contention of this article, therefore, that it not us as individuals, nor as collectives that should form the focus of analysis when seeking to understand what is



necessary to inculcate the social changes necessary to face environmental challenges, but the practices around which daily life coalesce.

This article goes further than supporting a practice theory orientation by suggesting that we might not only focus upon the practices themselves, but the relationship between practices. Food provides one such nexus around which appropriate intervention points for a public policy geared towards carving pathways towards more sustainable ways of life may be identified. As a first need of the human body, food implicates many social, technical, biological and ecological processes in its lifecycle that interact in complex ways, thus necessitating context-specific policy responses (Ericksen, 2008). For this reason, issues surrounding food production and provision have been explored from a wider system-based perspective (Heller and Keoleian, 2003) where global trends in production, distribution and consumption pose multiple policy challenges (Lang and Heasman, 2004). These accounts often presume an active consumer who chooses what to consume from a market of variable goods. Consumption thus arises from the presence or absence of a well-intended belief, attitude or value. If we were to take the view that consumption is a 'moment' in almost every practice (Warde, 2005), the policy problem is framed entirely differently, with practices and their interconnections serving as the unit of analysis.

From the data presented in this article, we can see that narratives of daily life routines coalesce around food practices. These are not made sense of in isolation from a suite of further interconnecting practices, for food practices are clearly embedded in materiality (housing, technology), infrastructure (transport, amenities) and cultural notions of appropriateness (ideas about proper eating, care and convenience). They are also susceptible to either reproduce or rupture due to smaller changes in the temporal organisation of daily life and/or due to the life-course events such as birth, death, marriage and divorce. This suggests that it is at the nexus of practices that we might conceive of unlocking or locking practices.

While consumer narratives explored here suggest that practices are a useful means of understanding daily routines and their persistence, much further work is to be done to identify points for intervention that encourage the evolution of new and more sustainable pathways. Indeed, this article is not alone in agreeing with Warde (2005) that the external linkages between practice elements are under-researched (Mylan, 2014). As a starting point, this article first contributes to the body of work that identifies practices as a more useful unit of analysis than consumer choices. Employing a practice-oriented approach thus reframes the 'problem' of the unsustainable consumer, while empirical data explored highlight food practice as a nexus around which to think differently about interconnections between related practices. It is in thinking about the nexus of practices that we might come to more novel and dynamic policy interventions for sustainable consumption.

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